LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Health Care for Blacks in the United States

To the Editor:

Currently, the demand and availability of medical care for black citizens in the US constitutes a serious racio-socioeconomic problem. Infant, maternal, cancer, and stroke deaths and deaths and complications from hypertension, diabetes mellitus, chronic alcoholism, AIDS, and drug abuse are increasing at alarming rates in comparison with whites.

Although blacks in the US constitute approximately 12% of the population, homicides and suicides are steadily increasing in black communities. The reasons for these fatalities in black communities are directly related to the concept of self-hatred, alcoholism, illicit drug traffic, joblessness, poverty, poor housing, and subnormal educational standards.

Cancers of the esophagus, lung, prostate, colon, and rectum are increasing at alarming comparative rates. Blacks are not seeking preventive medical and dental care in proportion to their needs, which is probably related to education, income, and availability of quality health care.

The dualistic health care system in the US is a two-tier concept, with good health care geared to those who have and inaccessibility for those who have not. I propose the following solutions to this serious problem for blacks in our free society.

1. Creation and institution of preventive concepts of medical and dental health problems in children, adults, and the elderly. These sustained and continuous measures should begin with pregnant women and extend into their children's elementary and high schools. In low income areas, particularly, good health concepts should be part of the compulsory education for all school children. Courses should address adequate rest and exercise; good nutrition; correct dental care; high fiber/low fat diets; avoidance of drinking alcohol, smoking, and chewing tobacco; maintenance of family medical histories; good bowel functions; and accident prevention. In addition, alcohol and smoking advertisements should be abolished in black communities.

2. Adequate public and private housing facilities and law enforcement personnel must be provided in black and other minority groups.

3. Adult education and child care facilities should be made available in these critical communities.

Health has been a low priority in the aforementioned communities, falling behind security, housing, employment, education, drug abuse, and food. We must re-emphasize the critical importance of available and adequate health care. Health care should be geared toward prevention as well as diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up. We live in a heterogeneous society, with different colors, circumstances, religious backgrounds, customs, and ideals; however, every American citizen should have the right of and accessibility to high-quality health care.

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The Shame of Miami

To the Editor:

The riots that occurred in the Overtown and Liberty City communities of Miami, Florida, made me sad and ashamed to be a black American. Unfortunately, my position as the only black medical examiner in Dade County, Florida, has afforded me more than ample opportunity to witness the impoverishment of the black community here.

Shortly after arriving in Miami in late June 1988, I became acutely aware of the shortage of black personnel in the medical, legal, educational, and law enforcement fields. This was a shock to me after living in the more secure black environment of Washington, DC, and the Howard University medical community.

Orientation for my job involved learning about the community that I would be called to most frequently for crime scene investigation. I was introduced to a term, "Liberty City Natural," by my colleagues. This phrase was coined as a euphemism for the large number of homicides occurring in the Liberty City neighborhoods. Despite the origin of the phrase, I took personal offense to the use of that terminology.

Both Liberty City and Overtown reflect the past of most large inner cities that have been burnt out by previous riots. But Miami's riots occur again and again. According to a Dade County fact book, 80% of all blacks in the county live in one of these two communities (*Dade County Facts*, Research Division, Metro-

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Dade County Planning Department, 1987). Overtown housing would be condemned by any public health department. The buildings are burnt out, many are without electricity and running water. Few stores available to the public, and social services are practically nonexistent. Most of our calls to Overtown involve the complications of poor hygiene and malnourishment.

Liberty City, in contrast to its name, entraps its hard-working citizens who cannot afford homes in other areas of Miami. Unfortunately, most of my calls in Liberty City involve young blacks who die from homicides or drug overdose.

In fact, the black population, although making up only 20% of the total county population, is overrepresented in homicides and drug-related deaths in Dade County by a figure that approaches 45% for the year ending 1988.

In my opinion, the situation exists because of the extreme high poverty level among Miami blacks. The majority of Dade County blacks have no means of achieving the "American Dream." The black people here are underrepresented in every facet of the city and county government, including health and human services. Young blacks see crime and drug involvement as an easy way of escaping their bleak environments. After all, you can make more money being a "look out" or a "runner" for a drug dealer than you can can working at fast-food restaurants.

In the business sector of Liberty City, burglar bars can be found on the barely surviving businesses and one to two liquor stores can be seen on nearly every block. Multiple discussions with inner city black youths have revealed to me the shockingly young age at which they begin to smoke, drink alcohol, use drugs, and acquire criminal records.

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I was not surprised by the reaction of the Overtown community to the police shooting that took place on Martin Luther King's birthday. What made me sad and ashamed was that the riots took place in the very community that had been previously ravaged by violence and poverty. I was on call that dreadful evening and witnessed first hand the burning and looting of property in Overtown and later in Liberty City. The few stores and businesses that serve these areas (many are owned by blacks) were publicly looted and destroyed. Even worse, many of the people participating in these crimes were mature adults instructing their children on what to remove from the stores.

What was gained from these disturbances? A sense of shame in the minds of the majority of hardworking, black Dade County citizens and an even greater sense of hopelessness and despair in the Liberty City and Overtown communities.

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